DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 730 RC 023 881

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TITLE	Outdoor Education in a Peace and Reconciliation Community.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	9p.; In: Outdoor Education and Experiential Learning in the U.K.; see RC 023 871.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adventure Education; *Christianity; Collective Settlements; *Conflict Resolution; Consciousness Raising; Cultural Pluralism; Foreign Countries; Group Dynamics; *Outdoor Education; *Peace; *Spirituality
IDENTIFIERS	Nature; Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Corrymeela, a Christian community in Northern Ireland, uses a variety of activities, one of which is outdoor education, to tackle the challenges of living within a contested society and to model new possibilities. Structured peace-building experiences focus on the relational aspect of those people, groups, and communities who experience conflict. Three categories of outdoor experiences--urban adventure, outdoor journeys, and adventurous experiences--reflect a rich and complex repository of knowledge designed to support the peace and reconciliation process. Many of the participants know they will be sharing experiences with people about whom they already hold certain perceptions or prejudices, or whom they simply disrespect. The novelty of outdoor adventure activities provides a safe environment in which to see, meet, and hear the experiences of others. Outdoor journeys simulate, through the process of ritual and challenge, the "hero's journey" in which difficult physical and mental ordeals culminate in wisdom and transformation. While undergoing adventurous experiences, notions of shared fate, the dissolving of social hierarchy, and the absence of material possessions lead to a recognition of spiritual or universal connections. Adventurous and outdoor experiences can help people understand their own 'realistic' position in the world. They help participants recognize their personal competencies and desires and the influence of cultural and societal forces so that they may reconcile the relationships around and within them. (TD)

ED 471 730

Outdoor Education in a Peace and Reconciliation Community

by
Mike Bartle

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Mike Bartle

Outdoor Education in a Peace and Reconciliation Community

Introduction

No area within Great Britain has suffered as much conflict as Northern Ireland in the latter half of this century. Such conflict manifests as physical harm, intimidation, isolation and exclusion. Individuals, families, groups and communities experience and witness this 'violence' in varying amounts. Within this context several groups, organisations and communities have sought new and innovative ways to tackle the challenges of living within such a contested society and one such community is the Corrymeela Community.

Based in Northern Ireland, this Christian community recognises the fragile stability of a divided society and provides opportunities for people to come together to tell their stories, experience the stories of others and model new possibilities. To do so involves utilising a variety of activities, structures and experiences, one of which is outdoor education.

The Corrymeela Community

It is difficult to document here the development of the work of the Corrymeela community since its founding in 1964[1]. However, the current work of the community, focuses on the tension and conflict between the different groups and different traditions found in Northern Ireland and in many other contested societies. Importantly, those behind Corrymeela believe that there is a need to build bridges across the fault-lines that break and separate our humanity and our communities (Davey, 1993). Outdoor and adventurous activities in this context are used to aid the development of personal, cultural, spiritual and communal connections.

This vision is not based on some utopian dream of solving deeply rooted conflicts through one programmed outdoor encounter. Nor is it based on a belief that creating temporary shared experiences will be the panacea for all societal or personal ailments. Through structured peace building experiences rather than the often-highlighted tasks of peace keeping and peace making in Northern Ireland, Corrymeela focuses upon the relational aspect of those people, groups and communities who experience conflict. Carefully planned and sequenced residential and serial experiences provide opportunities for individuals to witness and challenge those circumstances which foster and maintain hostilities, anxieties and fears.

Through an atmosphere of concern, trust and support, suspicion and conflict are

[1] For a more detailed understanding of the background and work of the community see Davey, R. (1993) A Channel of Peace: the story of the Corrymeela Community.

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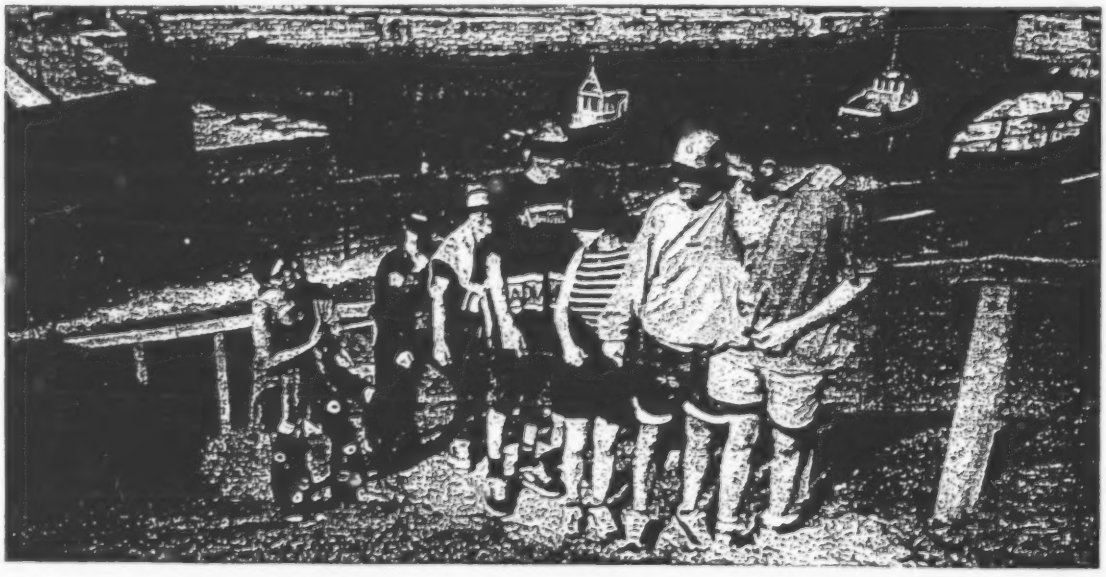
confronted, often using outdoor experiences, journeys and adventurous activities. Often, finding out what unites people is as important as clarifying what divides them. For outdoor education, the challenge lies in bringing people together through adventurous encounters and outdoor experiences in order to gain insight into their own position and the position of others.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss fully the relationship between outdoor education and peace and reconciliation work at 'Corrymeela', or to analyse the essential connection to community and spiritual growth. However the theme running through this chapter is that outdoor and adventurous experiences need to attend to the social and cultural forces operating as well as understanding the learning potential of community and spirituality.

Importantly, at Corrymeela, adventurous and outdoor experiences are not a recreational facility to provide a distraction to the important peace and reconciliation process. Nor are they an educational tool to advance individual prosperity. The construction of outdoor experiences at Corrymeela reflects a rich and complex repository of knowledge designed to support the peace and reconciliation process. Such outdoor programmes reject the 'smorgasbord' approach of outdoor and adventurous experiences where the faster, higher, more exotic encounters help define and satisfy one's life, existence and meaning. For in this approach, the number and frequency of experiences amassed can be used as a representation of an individual's or society's benefits rather than the potential for learning or reconciliation.

Naming Outdoor Activities and Experiences

I have chosen to divide the nature of the outdoor experiences that operate at Corrymeela into three categories. First, there are those activities which take place on the residential centre site and rely upon adventurous constructions through natural or manmade obstacles, creations and scenarios. These may be termed as urban or peri-



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urban adventure activities.

Second, there are outdoors journeys which range from country walks, ferry trips to nearby Rathlin Island, and coach trips to explore areas such as the 'Giant's Causeway'. There are also walks from the centre to the local town of Ballycastle along the beach or to other places which hold symbolic significance or are viewed as areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Finally, there are adventurous experiences that may include coasteering, river exploration and bivouacs. Through the interplay of these three categories outdoor experiences are integrated into the peace and reconciliation process.

Urban Adventure

Urban adventure activities differentiate from other aspects of outdoor adventure due to the familiarity of location, ease of implementation and the use of creative themes. There are a number of interesting aspects that emerge at 'Corrymeela' when implementing such experiences. First, many of the groups are cross-cultural (e.g. Catholic-Protestant, North-South, English-Irish) and may arrive knowing that they will be sharing experiences with people about whom they already hold certain perceptions, prejudices or whom they simply disrespect. Apart from the reluctance to meet, share or support individuals may also exhibit tension, anxiety and fear. As such, activities which contain, distract and bring together these people can provide shared experience within a novel setting. This novelty is often used to create a safe space; a new opportunity to see, meet and hear the experiences of others. Unfortunately, after such experiences where individuals share with 'the other', the 'novelty or created safe space' may become the 'exceptional' thereby explaining why it is possible to come together here, during such new and exciting activities. Their world-view can remain intact because this place is seen as exceptional! Therefore, urban adventure activities are seen only as a way to connect people to Corrymeela, to reconnect to other people and to disconnect from some of their past.

Outdoor Journeys

Traditionally, outdoor journeys have often been associated with people who receive a call to embark on a quest. Leaving the security of known lifestyles and attempting to 'penetrate the ends of the earth' conjure up images of the difficult physical and mental ordeal that culminates in wisdom or achievement. The adventurer (or heroic figure[2]) having endured such hardship, returned back to their culture, or not, empowered or transformed. Hence the powerful impact of a journey was often witnessed or imagined through the physical endeavour of outdoor adventures, exploration or through the challenge of new and demanding land and seascapes.

The symbolic significance, for instance, of locality, place and border often hold impor-

[2] See Riffenburgh, B. (1993) The Myth of the Explorer, for a fascinating account of nineteenth century explorers and how newspapers and other media fuelled mythological images.

tant cultural meanings for some of the people of Northern Ireland. I remember vividly the reaction of one Belfast teenager, when walking along a track below the impressive cliffs of Fairhead. The Scottish Highlands and Islands were clearly defined across the sea and I watched as the surprise of the proximity to Scotland sunk in. In the conversation that followed he questioned the connections between England, Ireland and Scotland. The surroundings had provided an opportunity to consciously explore his knowledge of the cultural and natural environment. In Ballycastle, as in other areas of the world, the land and seascapes provide a conceptual ordering which provide ample opportunities to explore values, norms and differences.

The journeys planned at Corrymeela do not necessitate a series of difficult physical or psychological ordeals nor do they seek to empower an individual. The current cultural fascination to interpret the intensity or outcomes of a journey for the purposes of individual and interpersonal benefit, either during such an experience, or in more contemplative or structured moments afterwards has, I believe, mistakenly assumed that self-focus and reflection leads to self-development. In doing this, we have perhaps allowed narcissistic notions to over-shadow an extensive exploration of the individual. These journeys do, however, stimulate, through the process of ritual and challenge, an encounter which Rebillot (1993) calls a 'hero's journey'[3].

On another occasion, for example, whilst walking along a local beach with a group after a period of trust activities and solo reflection, one group member told me of his/her hate to be born, as I was, English. After an initial sense of unease about being an outsider I soon began to appreciate how outdoor experiences can provide a 'safe space' to allow such encounters.

Adventurous Experiences

Current perspectives on adventure seem prepared to accept unknown dimensions. Uncertainty of outcome and the confronting of opportunities beyond our initial comprehension, are frequently cited as definitions (Mortlock, 1984; Miles and Priest, 1990; Hopkins and Putnam, 1993). At Corrymeela, adventurous experiences accept this dimension as well as illuminating an interplay between diversity, equality and interdependence. Diversity means to recognise and value similarities and differences between people. Equality means to meet each person equally and interdependence to give meaning to shared experience and the promoting of kinship.

Central to these dimensions are the notions of shared fate, feelings of excitement, apprehension, anxiety, the dissolving of social hierarchy and the absence of material possessions. As such, forest walks, coasteering, river and headland exploration seek to involve all group members using centre equipment such as waterproofs and wetsuits. Activities, therefore, are heavily dependent upon season, weather and group construction and staff start with the assumption that activities may be altered or indeed, not occur.

[3] In The Call to Adventure: Bringing the Hero's Journey to Daily Life, Rebillot, P. (1993) provides a Gestaltian description and framework of the journey of the individual (male or female) Hero.

One regular activity is a night walk to the local beach which involves negotiating a grassy slope and traversing a beach defence storm wall. The linking with the natural environment often provides moments of intimacy and surprise. When, for instance, participants notice the smell of the seaweed and salt air as well as the different noises produced by the sea breaking on the varying shoreline and beach compositions. Such intimacy with the natural landscape can provide significant responses to what may initially be abstract and unfamiliar. It is not uncommon, during times of individual reflection or collective worship afterwards, for such experiences to be offered a spiritual context.

Outdoor Education and Spirituality

While much has been written on personal and social development within Outdoor Education, mainly by Outdoor Educationalists (Mortlock, 1984; Hopkins and Putnam, 1993), there exists little contemporary work on the issue of spiritual development during outdoor experiences. Both Mortlock (1984) and Shackles (1997) debate the adequacy of adventure in assisting reconciliation through the connecting fabric of shared spiritual experience. They suggest that such experiences seek to provide freedom from mediocre cultural relationships and access, partly through spiritual energies, opportunities to explore new ways of feeling, knowing and behaving.

Apart from these notions, the area of spiritual development during outdoor experiences has escaped extensive scrutiny. This seems surprising given the long association with often-documented spiritual and mystical outdoor journeys and experiences. Pilgrimages, a quest, benevolent service, rites of passage and journeys into unknown environments were often seen as ways for a person to gain spiritual learning and wisdom. As John Muir (in Teale, 1982) hinted at: "I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in" (p. 311). For Muir, the outdoor journey became an inward quest.

At Corrymeela an important aspect of such encounters, is not the search for spiritual development but rather, the recognition of the spiritual or universal connections. By way of example, I noticed a group member sitting thoughtfully during a visit to a natural oak wood near the Corrymeela community's residential centre. In conversation, the notion of peace and serenity emerged. "Isn't it beautiful here?" seemed more than a

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rhetorical question of aesthetic appreciation or a consideration of the relationship between beauty and a specific location. In moments such as this one, it is difficult to separate out feelings of intrusiveness from the sharing of an individual's experience.

Corrymeela begins when you leave

I believe that courage is all too often mistakenly seen as the absence of fear. If you descend by rope from a cliff and are not fearful to some degree, you are either crazy or unaware. Courage is seeing your fear in a realistic perspective, defining it, considering the alternatives and choosing to function in spite of risk
(Zunin in Schoel and Stratton, 1990).

If Mortlock (1984) warned us of the dangers of misadventure then Zunin warns of the dangers in naively associating virtues with adventure. He further questions a view of adventure learning which fails to recognise, accept or integrate a person into the world. Adventurous and outdoor experiences, in his view, act in a changing intellectual, literary or recreational fashion where words such as risk, challenge and fear hold romantic and escapist connotations which some would suggest are becoming increasingly and strangely distant to us (Van Matre, 1993). Such estrangement is intensified as we seek an understanding of outdoor and adventurous experiences not within the subtle and complex processes of 'nature's' balance or human spirit. But, within a time-scale and culture which seeks to utilise and master both the natural world and the organisation of human life (Watts, 1958).

At Corrymeela, the task is concerned not with control over one's own destiny by achieving personal desires or freedom from societal and life's responsibilities. To value such experiences, there needs to be an acceptance of diversity, a promotion of agency and a celebration of the dynamics of inherent relationships. Adventurous and outdoor experiences can help us understand our own 'realistic' position in the world. They help us recognise our personal competencies and desires and the influence of cultural and societal forces so that we may reconcile the relationships around and within each of us.

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